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Chapter Twelve. Angelique VII

October/November, 2027

Now, this happened a long, long time ago.

If I'm not mistaken... maybe about two months, or at most three, after I met

Angelique.

I can only ask you to imagine her. Much shorter than she is now, with that black hair like the night that barely reached her shoulders, the most expressionless face I had ever seen in someone, and a speaking ratio of ten words a day, if lucky. Perhaps back then she didn't resemble a machine as much as she resembled a dog that I took everywhere with me.

Of course, we hadn't left France by then, and the connection between us was practically non-existent. Luckily, or perhaps by providence, encounters with enemies were extremely rare, and we almost always managed to evade them rather than confront them. I say I'm grateful that it was that way because the Angelique of that time bore little resemblance to the one who accompanied me later on. The youger Angelique was completely incapable of wielding a weapon, let alone thinking of a way to devise a strategy that would allow us to overcome a numerically superior enemy.

She was, undoubtedly, dead weight. If there was a need to fight, I was the only one there, yelling at her to hide while I took care of the poor fools without training who had the misfortune of crossing paths with me. No, it's not that I believe or consider myself a super soldier, far from it, but my experience was enough to easily crush someone who didn't even know how to enter a room without getting shot to pieces. In short, it was a piece of cake if that was the case.

"Oh, a house."

We continued along a dirt road. I believe... if I'm not mistaken, it was the same road that later led us to that field of flowers I mentioned earlier. But don't take my word for it, I could be wrong.

The sky was cloudy, and it was around ten in the morning. To the left of the road, there was only open field and I think some crops, further on some trees, perhaps a small forest... and to our right, a country

house. I dare to guess that it belonged to someone wealthy. I mean, judging by the size, the decorations, and all that. Two stories with white walls, a gable orange roof, some stone sculptures or something like that in front, and a stone path leading to the door.

I turned to look at Angelique and rested the ACE on my shoulder.

"Can you hear anything coming from the inside?"

Now that I think about it, I'm not sure when exactly I started experiencing hearing problems. I mean, I know it was sometime between 2022 and 2026, but I can't pinpoint the exact date when I realized it. I hope I don't end up completely deaf.

Angelique looked up, but she didn't even open her mouth as if considering saying something. She simply shook her head twice, indicating a negative response.

Those eyes...

Those piercing blue pearls...

There was no sparkle in them.

Nothing.

Those were spheres completely devoid of life and reason. They were only there to guide that girl where to step to avoid falling into a pit, and not much more. They intrigued me greatly. What could I do with those eyes at my disposal? What good were they to me? How could I survive better with them? Why did I want to have that girl by my side? Why did I bring her along in the first place? And I still don't know the answer to that last question.

"Alright... stay alerted as we move forward and tap my back if you happen to hear anything."

I removed the magazine from my weapon, looked inside, and placed it back. It didn't make much sense since I was already certain it was fully loaded, but the habit of wanting to feel even more secure,

if possible, never faded away.

I instructed Angelique to stay behind me, and with slow and silent steps, I made my way towards the building.

It was an ordinary country house, nothing particularly noteworthy, with no signs or posters on the walls other than one indicating the surname of the house's occupants. I didn't care, so I only gave it a brief glance, which is why I can't recall what it said. With my back against the wall next to the main entrance of the house—a wooden door painted blue that didn't appear very sturdy—I looked at Angelique, who was on the other side. She shook her head again, and I slowly reached out my hand toward the doorknob, turning it ever so gently.

".. it's not closed..."

I pushed the door once I heard the latch fully disengage, and I waited for it to open completely before peeking my head inside.

Not a soul was present in that ordinary

living-dining room. A wooden floor, a ceiling as white as snow, and several sets of wooden furniture that matched the interiors. There was a long table, eight chairs, sofas on one side, a television... but everything was very clean.

"Not a speck of dust. This place... are you sure you don't hear anything, Angelique?"

She nodded once as she entered the house beside me. I couldn't hear anything either, but it was clear that the place was regularly cleaned, there wasn't even any visible clutter. We walked through a few rooms and found a bathroom, two bedrooms, and a kitchen in the same pristine condition as the previous room.

I let my rifle hang from its strap and brought a hand to my head when I opened the refrigerator and saw fresh food... even though there was no electricity.

"Perhaps there's a generator somewhere.

This... this is meat, it wouldn't last long if it loses its cold. There are people living here, but obviously they're not here right now."

"Hm."

That was how Angel used to seek my attention back then.

I closed the refrigerator and looked around for her. I saw her opening a door that was different from the others, a bit farther away, at one end of the hallway that connected the kitchen with the dining room and the bedrooms.

"Did you find anything?"

I followed her without rushing as she entered what I soon identified from memory as the house's garage. Perhaps there was a vehicle there that had caught her interest. Ah, if that had been the case, you can bet that our adventure would have been much easier and more manageable. But no, when I crossed the door with her,

a harsh reality hit me, reminding me of what lay beyond the walls of that peaceful house in the middle of nowhere.

"We are..."

It was indeed the house's garage, but its purpose had been completely altered.

Every single wall, from the one facing the street through the overhead door to the very one we had crossed to enter, was covered with shelves, cabinets, and racks filled, brimming, overflowing... with weapons.

As far as the eye could see, all you could see were weapons.

Pistols, rifles, submachine guns, sniper rifles, and even machine guns, and I swear I remember seeing a LAW resting on top of some crates. It was an arsenal, a complete arsenal ready to arm a small army. Without even having to open the cabinets, I could see hundreds of boxes of ammunition of all kinds on a table, making it abundantly clear that whoever

owned this house was prepared to take on a small town with just a few friends.

"This... no, I know what this is."

I was the first to step into the garage, and I stood right in the center, looking around at everything with a sense of resignation bordering on hopelessness.

Bulletproof vests, explosives, tactical gear, and electronic devices. Amere wasn't as well-armed, so those who controlled the area using this refuge as their base could only belong to a specific faction.

"They are Stateless."

"Hm?"

"Stateless, or *Vaterlandslos*. That's the name we gave them in the army. They are soldiers of any nationality who ended up, for one reason or another, separated from their forces. Subversion, dispersal, recruitment, or disillusionment. What unites them all is the feeling of being disenchanted with their own homeland, or

with the world in general, and deciding to fight on their own, both against the armies of various nations and against Amere, merely existing in this fallen world in order to survive... just because. We believe they have no motive or purpose, but they possess capabilities."

I took a deep breath before continuing.

"Amere is a gathering of wretched individuals, but they never managed to acquire enough potential to arm themselves with high-grade military equipment. The Vaterlandslos, on the other hand, are more dangerous despite being fewer in number. Most of them abandoned their armies with only the clothes on their backs, and they know exactly where to look and which bases to raid if they seek relevant equipment. This warehouse screams Vaterlandslos, and that means we need to leave as soon as possible. I can handle several Amere on my own, but just two Vaterlandslos would put me in danger. They are trained and well-

equipped; I wouldn't stand a chance against them while carrying you."

As I had expected, Angelique didn't contribute anything to the conversation and simply nodded silently. She then stood in front of one of the shelves, observing with mild curiosity the wide array of weaponry before her.

I unstrapped the backpack from my back and walked over to one of the tables to set it down, while I examined the contents of the ammunition boxes.

"While we're here, it wouldn't hurt to take the opportunity to resupply ourselves. Moments like these are extremely rare."

There was everything I could be looking for at that moment: 9x19mm and 7.62x51mm ammunition. I made space inside the backpack, amidst the changes of clothes and tools, to accommodate a decent number of boxes. It was sure to weigh a lot, but considering the cost-

benefit balance, I figured I would come out ahead in the long run. It's not so hard to find pistol rounds, but rifle ammunition is scarce, especially when it comes to 7.62.

As I continued with all the preparations, I raised my voice slightly without looking at the girl behind me.

"Has anything catched your eye?"

"..."

"I'm going to equip you. It occurred to me that I won't have another chance to choose a weapon from such a wide variety that you can use. I can't give you anything too heavy, but..."

I zipped up the backpack and then turned slowly, only to find Angel looking at me intently, as if she was waiting for some kind of instructions.

"Here."

I pointed with my hand to the space

right in front of me, and she walked slowly but obediently towards it, never taking her eyes off me.

I scratched my chin and then proceeded to remove the strap holding my rifle.

"Stretch your arms."

And I let the weapon rest on her slender, delicate, noticeably weak arms.

"Hn..."

With a slight whimper escaping her lips, Angelique furrowed her brow ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, as her shoulders stiffened and her forearms began to tremble. It was evident: the weapon was very heavy for her.

"That's only about four kilograms. If just that weight is almost enough to knock you down, we're in big trouble, Angel. I really wish I could give you a rifle or a carbine, but under those conditions, you'd end up

killing yourself before even aiming at an enemy. Let's see..."

With just one hand, I took the weapon back, and I could hear her let out a sigh of relief. I adjusted the strap around me and took another look around the room, this time with a more analytical, thoughtful demeanor.

"Almost everything here is assault rifles."

And they were from all over Europe as well. There were no shortage of Russian rifles either, including some that were nothing more than Chinese copies of Kalashnikovs. AUG models two and three, a Barrett M82, AKs of all types, sizes, and calibers, SVDs, SVUs, snipers ranging from Steyrs to an AWP. I walked around in circles a couple of times, ignoring the attentive eyes of Angelique as if I were deciding what groceries to buy for dinner that night.

I stopped in front of a particular shelf

and picked up a rifle with one hand and a submachine gun with the other. I quickly inspected them to ensure they were intact and then returned to her. Without saying a word, I placed one of them back on her arms.

"Ah..."

Once again, she let out a complaint.

"That's a TAR-21. Around three kilograms. It's still a lot?"

"..."

"Then this will make it."

I picked up the Israeli rifle and set it aside, perhaps feeling a bit reluctant to give up a more powerful type of ammunition for something inferior. I placed the submachine gun in the hands of my back then useless companion.

...

But the expression of almost pain

returned to her face as soon as the cold metal of the weapon touched her fingers.

"Hmm? Still too heavy? This is a submachine gun. It's an MP5k, if I'm not mistaken, barely weighing around two kilograms. Don't tell me..."

Mainly because I didn't want to keep seeing that pained expression on her face, I took the submachine gun back from her and let it drop to the side.

The major issue was that if she couldn't even carry that, she wouldn't be able to handle practically anything in that garage. Nothing. Even a loaded pistol worth carrying would be close to a kilo and a half. Honestly, there was no way to make Angelique become of any value to me when it came to combat.

"... just forget it, Angel."

Resigned, I left her standing there and returned to the table where my backpack

awaited me, ready to burden my spine as soon as I dared lift it. Instead, I turned my back and rested both hands on the edge, releasing a weary sigh of frustration.

"... we're not gonna make it far like this..."

I gathered strength in my forearms to push myself up from the table, but my calculations were off. The weight on the table, that soft brown wooden table with all the boxes of ammunition on top, was lighter than expected. As I exerted some force obliquely, the legs gave way to the new impulse, shifting several centimeters backward. In other words, I nearly fell to the ground as the table moved when I leaned on it.

The edge opposite me slammed forcefully against the wall, and the impact caused the columns of boxes to topple like fallen towers. I gradually stood up, watching them cascade from the table and directly onto the floor, but I didn't pay

much more attention to it than that.

"... anyway, let's go. If we're not going to find anything else but that, then we have nothing else to do in this place. In fact, we're just unnecessarily risking ourselves."

When the final box tumbled down, I turned my head to catch her gaze, only to find that her eyes were fixated on the fallen crates scattered on the floor. She didn't see me; her attention was consumed by the disarray before her.

"Angel?"

"..."

"Hey..."

It almost seemed like she was deliberately ignoring me. I tried to follow her gaze, but no matter how much I did, all I could see was ammunition in the direction she was looking.

"Angel!"

Upon hearing my hoarse voice, she opened her eyes a bit wider and finally decided to look at me. She wasn't scared, just attentive, ready to be called upon for... whatever it was that I was going to ask of her.

"What's wrong? You saw something?"

Once again, she nodded her head in agreement, but this time she deemed it important to make it clear what had caught her attention, and finally spoke.

"Some... something different fell among the boxes."

"Different?"

"Hm. I heard it."

We let a few seconds pass, just the two of us, silently staring at each other. Almost complete silence, except for the occasional

chirping of birds outside. Not too far away, in fact, I think I even felt like it was coming from above, as if it were over the house.

"Okay..."

I turned around, crouched down, and began rummaging through box after box. Several of them were empty, and none of them held anything of interest to me.

As I practically slapped those packages from side to side, a noticeably different texture, and a different temperature, brushed against the tip of my right index finger. I leaned forward slightly, moved aside a few more boxes... and there it was.

"This... this is what you heard?"

Angelique stepped aside to get a better look as I picked up that plastic piece from the floor and held it with a certain lightness.

It was light. Very light.

"Just maybe..."

I turned to look at her once again, and then I looked down at what was in my hand.

The weapon that was in my hand.

The letters were clear to read, and the pistol had barely a scratch on the slide, it didn't seem to have seen much use.

It read 'Steyr M9-A1' near the end of the slide. I had never carried one of those, but it was comforting, in a way, to have something from my homeland in my hands. It felt like it brought me a little closer, just a little closer, to what used to be, to what I used to live and feel before everything went to shit.

I moved it around in the palm of my hand, shifting the weight and applying pressure to different points on my fingers, but... no, I didn't feel like it weighed anything. Or at least, compared to my 92,

it was super light.

"And perhaps..."

To my surprise, when I removed the magazine, I could see that it was loaded. There were about seven or eight rounds inside. I placed it on the table, pulled the slide back just to make sure it was empty, and then I told Angelique to come closer.

"Your hands."

And as she reached out her hands, I placed the pistol on top of them.

"How is it?"

"It is light."

"Good..."

I took it once again, inserted the magazine, and handed it back to her. Her small fingers trembled for a moment, but then they steadied. The girl lowered her

gaze to look at the gun. The tips of her bangs partially covered her face, and I couldn't see her expression clearly as she likely realized what would happen once she responded to my question with complete honesty.

"What about now?"

"... it is still light."

"Perfect."

She raised her head and buried those powerful blue spotlights into my dim and almost extinguished green lamps. I could almost hear her asking me why she had to become a killer like me. Why she had to stain her hands with the blood of others just because I wanted someone to support me.

Almost...

Almost, because at the end of the day, those were only my thoughts. The reality is that Angel never hesitated, she never hesitated and to this day she never hesitates. She took the gun just as I

ordered her to. And she concealed it in her clothing exactly as I instructed. Knowing what it was, knowing what it meant, and knowing where it would eventually lead, Angelique took possession of that gun fully aware that someday she would have to use it to kill someone. Perhaps not even in self-defense, perhaps just to shoot someone in the back to ensure her safety, as she had seen me do several times.

Even with all those times... Angelique never looked at me with fear. Those pearls always saw me the same way. Always attentive, almost with the intention of learning from me. Always, always waiting for the next order. Why? Why couldn't she simply hate me? Why didn't she try to escape from this life of death when she had the chance? Why couldn't she just remember it all and direct all her hatred towards me when she woke up on that hospital bed?

Why couldn't she escape before I arrived?

"Alez."

"Yeah?"

Why did it have to end like this?

"I don't know how to use it."

"I'll show you how later. The most important thing was to get you a weapon, and we did. Now..."

Turning my gaze back to the countless shelves, I let out a sigh. There was nothing else that I needed. I had no plans to swap out my weapons, and more ammunition would only mean more weight. It was time to head back to the kitchen, grab some food, and get out of there.

"I don't think I can make much room in my backpack... ah, should I leave some ammo behind? But I don't think I'll be able to resupply myself so conveniently later on."

As I muttered to myself in a low voice, I gestured for Angel to follow me. Not a word was spoken, just a glance from her, and then I heard her footsteps as we moved away from the far end of the room. Scratching my head, I didn't immediately leave. Instead, I leaned against the doorway, taking a moment to think. I pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and continued my murmuring under my breath.

"Food always has to be a priority above everything else. Also, water. I have both, although not in abundance, and water is not too difficult to find in this region with several streams around. However, I shouldn't rely too much on it. As for food, we have enough for maybe four or five days... eight if we take smaller portions. Assuming I take food for two more days, that would give us sustainability for two weeks if we ration it as if we were in an emergency. I don't want to carry more ammunition either. Besides, my backpack is already too heavy, and carrying even more would only cause me great

discomfort in combat. If I'm going to-"

"... Alez."

"-if I'm going to take advantage of this place having such a large reservoir of 7.62, I should give up some food, let's say reduce the amount to about three days - seven in an emergency- and replace the lost weight with a few more boxes of bullets. Hm... yes, it's not such a bad idea. There's a lot of forest around here, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find animals to hunt, although at the same time, it would contradict the principle of prioritizing intake above all else. Damn, the limits of space and weight are defeating me. If I were alone... if I were alone, I should take much less food and have enough space to carry all the ammunition I want, but there's no point in thinking about that if my current situation isn't going to change."

"... Alez!"

"We... we're heading northeast. I believe there was a small town nearby the last time I saw the map. No matter how looted the

cities may be, it's never impossible to find food in them. If we hold out until- ah, of course, medical supplies. I used the last bandage on Angelique last week. We also don't have any disinfectants, and I didn't see a first aid kit in the bathroom of this house. As soon as we reach a city or town, I should try to find a pharmacy that hasn't been completely emptied... although it's difficult, those places are always the first to be targeted. If we add that to the fact that there are still many civilians on the streets of France, it would be very strange if-"

"Alez!!"

Only Angelique's scream brought me back to reality. It wasn't the scream itself, nor the surprise at a sudden noise, that snapped me out of my thoughts, but rather the sheer fact of always-silent Angelique raising her voice.

Out of pure instinct and motor reflex, I reached into my clothes and pulled out my pistol, swiftly turning around, ready to fight or flee depending on the situation.

I'm not a machine, I never was, but my experiences out there have conditioned me greatly when it comes to external stimuli. If we're all silent and someone suddenly screams, I can only imagine that we're being ambushed. That's why I consider my reaction to be natural—it is within the world we live in.

"What is it?!"

"Ah-"

Angelique's eyes didn't stop at me; they fixated on the weapon in my hand. My finger wasn't on the trigger, but it must have still been intimidating to her, as her usually composed demeanor had cracked slightly. She had placed a hand on her chest, while the other pointed in a vague direction.

"N-no..."

"..."

Quickly, I realized that it was all a

misunderstanding on my part, so I tilted my head slightly and asked her to speak clearly.

"There... there is a backpack over there. If you want, I can..."

"..."

I looked down at the floor without moving my head, let out a snort to suppress the laughter at the exaggeration of my reaction, and crushed the cigarette that had fallen from my mouth with the tip of my boot.

It was quite an unusual situation.

"A backpack? I don't remember seeing one."

"Here."

I don't know when she spotted it, but she pulled out a black fabric backpack from behind a shelf, with multiple empty pockets. Without even asking me about it,

she hoisted it onto her back, secured the straps, adjusted their length, and then looked at me with her usual calmness.

"Do you think you're strong enough to carry a backpack, Angel? You know well that mine is not lightweight at all."

"I want to try."

'I want.' A word used solely for the explicit expression of a personal desire. But it's strange, because back then Angelique seemed to completely lack a will of her own. I wasn't entirely convinced, I didn't want carrying a backpack to make her an even heavier burden than she already was, but... I couldn't dismiss her first display of humanity. Angelique was - and is - my only escape in this shattered world, so I've always wanted to see her grow.

I left her standing there and walked over to her, then turned her around and lowered my backpack.

"If it's too heavy, you can let me know."

And so I started to burden her with weight. I gave her the water bottles, the food, and as I placed just one box of ammunition in one of the back pockets, I heard her faintly complain. For me, that was enough. I removed the box and closed her backpack, patting her right shoulder just once.

"Alright. If you can carry just that, you'll be a tremendous help to me. My back has been hurting ever since I picked you up."

On her own, she turned to face me, nodding once again and adjusting the straps.

"I can deal with this."

I could only stand there, staring at her without saying a word.

There was no visible change.

Perhaps a spark of motivation or

determination had ignited within her, but from the outside, it was not noticeable. Nothing. No glimmer in her pupils, no twitch of her lips.

Nothing...

Before I knew it, my hand was resting on her head. And even then, her expression remained unchanged.

"As soon as you start feeling pain from the weight, you'll let me know."

"Okay."

And I keep wondering: How did I appear from her point of view?

"Aren't you going to take any weapon with you?"

Her question was more than just unexpected, but it made me raise my eyebrows and take one last look around the garage.

"... no. I don't need it. I'm fine with what I have. There's some great gear here, but I don't feel like anything surpasses my ACE... or at least, I don't feel like I can get accustomed to anything as quickly to feel just as comfortable. That's crucial, Angelique. Feeling comfortable with what you use is one of the most important aspects."

. . .

I grabbed more 7.62mm ammunition. We returned to the kitchen, stole some food, and resumed our journey along the dirt road.

When I stopped to look back, Angelique was gazing at the house with a hint of curiosity.

"Did we forget anything?"

I tried to get her attention with my question, but it took her about ten seconds to turn and look at me.

"We did not."

"What is it then?"

"This house... I like it."

And she continued walking, even passing by me and walking ahead for a while.

Angelique...

You have grown so much.

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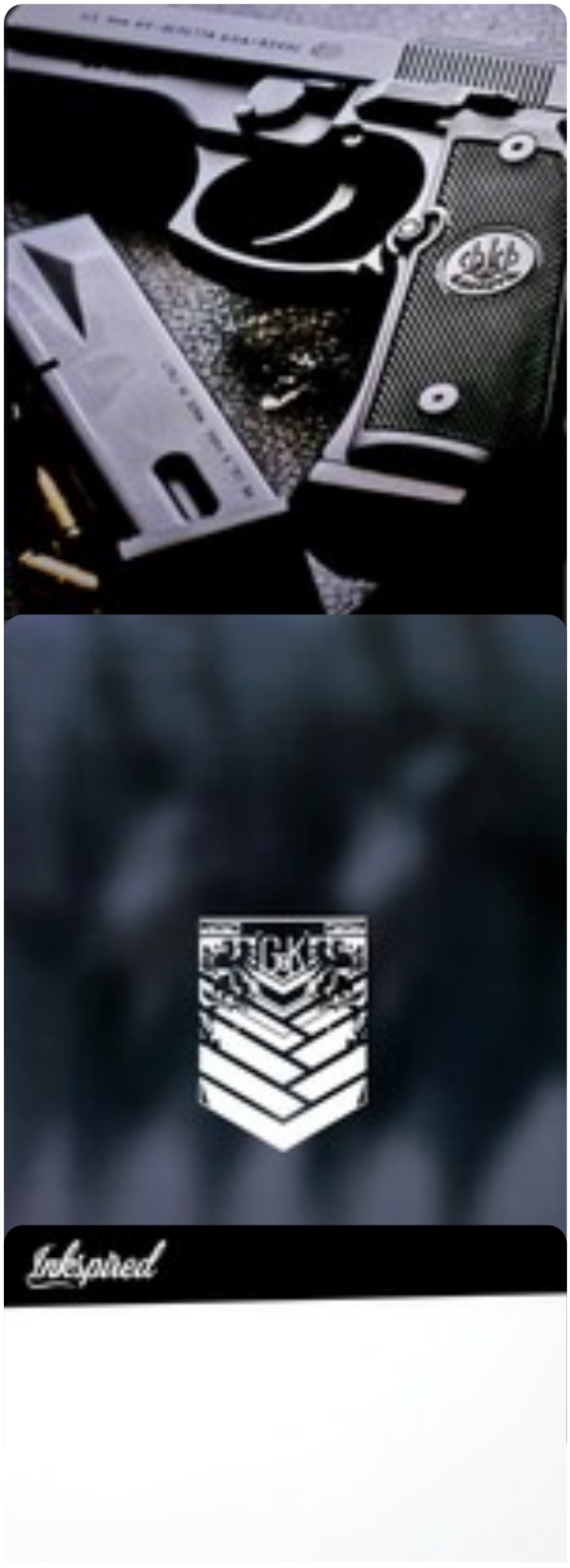

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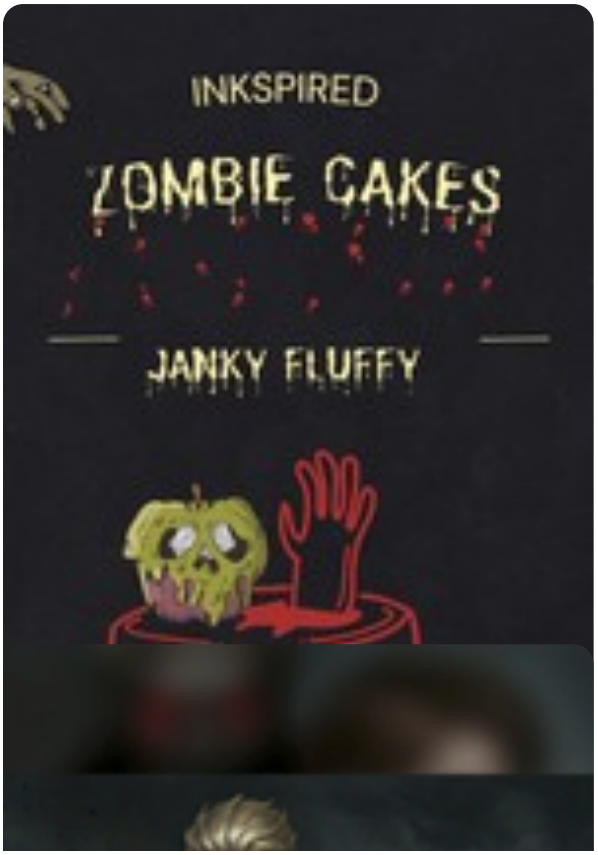

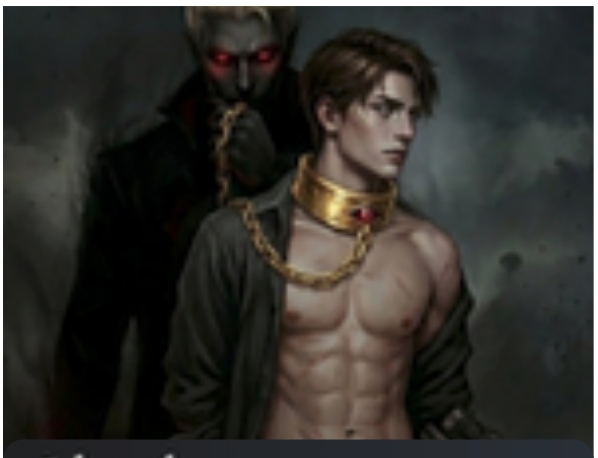

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